



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
WASHINGTON, DC

8 July 1997

MEMORANDUM FOR ALL CHAPLAIN SERVICE PERSONNEL

FROM: AF/HC

SUBJECT: Executive Guidance on Public Prayer in Military Ceremonies and Civic Occasions

1. Periodically, it is important to review and discuss certain issues that face the USAF Chaplain Service. One such important issue is that of public prayer at military ceremonies and civic occasions.
2. Strong tensions sometimes exist between personal faith-group integrity and the need to be inclusively sensitive to other faith groups. Although complex, such tension can be resolved even if not removed.
3. The intent of the attached Executive Guidance is to stimulate thoughtful dialogue concerning this issue throughout the USAF Chaplain Service. It is based on a talking paper, prepared and approved by the Armed Forces Chaplains Board (AFCB), entitled "Public Prayer in Military Ceremonies and Civic Occasions." It is neither "the final word" nor an exhaustive exploration of the subject. Rather, it is an attempt to stimulate thought, conversation, and training opportunities.
4. Please distribute a copy to each chaplain and CSSP at your location. Sometimes CSSP also are given the same opportunities to pray in public. I strongly encourage all levels of leadership to use this and other available resources as the basis for ongoing training and dialogue.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "William J. Dendinger", is positioned above the typed name. A vertical line is to the right of the signature.

WILLIAM J. DENDINGER
Chaplain, Major General USAF
Chief of the Chaplain Service

Attachment:
Executive Guidance

**EXECUTIVE GUIDANCE
REFLECTING AFCB STUDY:
PUBLIC PRAYER IN MILITARY CEREMONIES
AND CIVIC OCCASIONS**

Background. Part of our shared ministry as military chaplains is the frequent invitations we receive to pray at military ceremonies and civic occasions. Such prayers take place in a pluralistic context in which differing religious beliefs are held by the audience. Professional sensitivity is required as we shape our ministry to meet the diverse religious needs and rights of the military community.

Discussion. Several factors will facilitate healthy professional discussion concerning this important dimension of our ministry. Foremost, we must avoid acrimonious, combative debate with each other. Rather, as we recognize and affirm our own diversity of religious beliefs, we can engage in healthy, open dialogue. It is not the purpose of this executive guidance either to establish policy or to explore every nuance of this issue. Rather, we believe this to be a positive opportunity for a fruitful exploration of the matter of public prayer in military ceremonies and civic occasions. We offer the following in this spirit.

The Opportunity. Chaplains have the opportunity to fully participate in all aspects of military life. Our access and influence extend beyond the decision-making processes of command into the very fabric of military life. Our presence is encouraged and needed. It is therefore not unusual for chaplains to be invited to offer prayer at the commander's staff meetings, evening prayer at taps, retirement ceremonies, dining-ins, military changes of command, dedications of new military construction, memorial observances, and other events that are part of the rituals and ceremonies characterizing military life. Our public prayers at such happenings represent an opportunity to serve.

The Context/Setting. Some military ceremonies which, by custom, include invocations and benedictions, are civic in nature. They may or may not require mandatory, formations of military personnel. Within this context, we suggest the following for discussion:

- Praying at military ceremonies and civic occasions is not military policy; it is tradition. Such religious expressions are appropriate as long as the Department of Defense maintains a policy of neutrality--neither requiring nor prohibiting public prayer on occasions when prayer is desired by those organizing the event.
- The Department of Defense and its military Services must carefully balance the requirements of the First Amendment, neither mandating the establishment of religious practice nor prohibiting members of the military from enjoying their rights of free exercise of religion.
- All matters associated with the event are subject to the desires of the organizers of the event and the prerogative of the installation/unit commander.
- The chaplain's involvement at all such events is voluntary. When the chaplain does offer prayer, common sense suggests sensitivity to the pluralistic religious beliefs of those present.

- There are legitimate reasons for chaplains to participate freely or withdraw entirely from certain public ceremonies and military observances. For example, the Pledge of Allegiance, a patriotic song, or a reading from Scripture may seem to fit some occasions better.
- If the chaplain cannot discover a way to be sensitive to the pluralistic religious beliefs of those present, the chaplain ought not to pray at the event. There may be some audiences for whom it is impossible to adequately address the religious rights and needs of those present.
- Chaplains who exclude themselves for these reasons must never be made subject to recrimination or retribution.

The Challenge. When praying at military ceremonies or civic occasions, chaplains may experience a tension between their specific, personal beliefs (including the requirements of their denomination) and the desire not to exclude those with different beliefs. The challenge is to pray within the integrity of one's own faith, while at the same time being aware that others who are present may have very different beliefs. How can we best pray in a manner that does not exclude or offend others? Is it even possible to be totally inclusive of the increasingly pluralistic military environment? How is a chaplain to remain faithful to faith group belief and language, while at the same time honoring the religious sensitivities and diversity of the assembly? How can prayer be faith-specific in content and yet not be perceived as proselytizing, insensitive, or offensive?

The Chaplain Who Prays. Both DoD and USAF directives and instruction regulate and protect the right to minister according to the guidelines and beliefs of one's faith group. They require chaplains to care for their respective faith group members in a manner consistent with the faith group's tenets and practices. At the same time, these directives address the rights and needs of persons of other faith groups.

- DoD Directive 1304.19 establishes the following policy concerning chaplains: "They shall minister to personnel of their own faith group, and facilitate ministries appropriate to the rights and needs of persons of other faith groups in the pluralistic military environment."
- AFD 52-1 (Par. 1.5) directs that "The chaplain service will be a cooperative and pluralistic ministry, and chaplains will adhere to the requirements of their endorsing religious bodies."
- AFI 52-101 (Par. 1.5) implements policy with the following statement: "Do not perform duties incompatible with your professional role and noncombatant status. You do not have to take part in religious activities that conflict with your faith group doctrines or personal religious conviction."

Various resources and guidelines are available to the chaplain in implementing these ministries. The chaplain, endorsed by a specific denomination, is normally provided with ecclesiastical and denominational guidelines. The additional guidelines that follow (though not legally binding) also deserve close attention and are offered for discussion.

- “The Covenant and the Code of Ethics for Chaplains of the Armed Forces” was produced by The National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces. Several items applicable to our topic are helpful and worth noting.
 - “I will hold in trust the traditions and practices of my religious body.”
 - “I will understand as a chaplain in the Armed Forces that I must function in a pluralistic environment with chaplains of other religious bodies to provide ministry to all military personnel and their families entrusted to my care.”
 - “I will, if in a supervisory position, respect the practices and beliefs of each chaplain I supervise, and exercise care not to require of them any service or practice that would be in violation of the faith practices of their particular religious body.”
- “Guidelines for Civic Occasions,” provided by the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), refers to public prayer in a pluralistic setting as both “a privilege and a responsibility.” NCCJ encourages that such prayer ...
 - seeks the highest common denominator without compromise of conscience.
 - calls upon God on behalf of those gathered.
 - uses words and phrases that allow persons of different faiths to give assent to what is said.
 - uses language most widely understood by the audience, unless the event intends to celebrate cultural-ethnic diversity, in which case several languages might be effective.
 - remains faithful to the purposes of acknowledging the divine presence and seeking blessing, while avoiding using the context as an opportunity to preach, argue or testify.
- Chaplains should consult freely and openly with colleagues, as well as those “with and for whom we pray.” We have all observed chaplains who publicly pray in a manner consistent with their respective faith traditions but neither exclude nor offend anyone present. It is helpful to consult with such chaplains as a means of broadening one's own approach to public prayer at military ceremonies and civic occasions. It is important that supervisory chaplains ensure periodic training in the area of prayer and pluralism so that such discussions can occur.
- Supervisory chaplains must be familiar with the needs, restrictions, and style of their subordinate chaplains' denominations and faith groups. This will enable an informed position from which to assign chaplains to specific ministries, including public prayer at military ceremonies and civic occasions.

- Subordinate chaplains with concerns about public prayer should share matters of conscience or ecclesiastical requirements with their supervisors. A chaplain might profitably provide a copy of the applicable ecclesiastical guidelines to the supervisory chaplain or to the commander (if serving alone).
- Official policy will continue to protect the rights and needs of faith groups under the free exercise of religion clause. However, military ceremonies and civic occasions are not religious services and reflect no particular denominational doctrine. Prayers are therefore said and done in a manner that best includes all who are present. It is the chaplain's sound judgment, discretion, and good taste which are relied upon and encouraged.

Considerations in the Art of Prayer. Whenever we claim our right to do something, we should be aware of our responsibility to do it well and respectfully. So it is with the art of public prayer. Chaplains are expected to “pray well” within religious services *and* in military ceremonies and civic occasions. The following represent some general issues and suggestions when praying in the latter setting:

- Effective prayer includes ...
 - Awareness of the setting's purpose.
 - Reason for the assemblage.
 - Affirmation of the corporate, collective identity, not individual distinctions beyond those who may be honored by the ceremony, and a recognition of the transcendent reality of the prayer.
 - Predictable language.
- No group is completely homogenous, and not everyone will identify completely with all that is done in ritual ceremonies.
- The style, demeanor, and goodwill of the prayer giver--and the prayer's tone--are as important to the occasion as is the prayer's content. Words by themselves are not the total communication. Cues are still necessary--such as pace tempo and body language.
- When discussing the merits of a particular approach or style, it is important to acknowledge that sound values tend to compete with one another. It in the final analysis, however, we are responsible for the prayers we offer.
- We have options. We are capable of both creating insight and meaning and also evoking emotions through our prayers. Prayer can be both a “head and heart” event.
- Certain questions may be asked to enhance our discussion--
 - Is the chaplain praying on behalf of the assembled audience, or is the chaplain leading the audience in prayer?
 - Is the occasion for prayer to be the central focus of the event?

- Because there is no consensus on what prayer is (for example, some contend that only private prayer is valid), how will the chaplain “define the moment” of public prayer?
- Because individual participants “give up” something in the case of any/all communal events, what are the prayer and prayer-giver giving up or asking others to give up?
- Is public prayer in military ceremonies and civic occasions “our own prayer,” a private prayer, or does it somehow belong to the moment or to the occasion?
- Who is requesting the prayer? What are the expectations of the requester(s)?

Conclusion: This issue and others relating to our military ministries require constant attention and discussion. They call from us our best professional efforts. All of us have heard a Service member say, “Chaplain, your words in last night’s evening prayer really meant something to me.” Or, “Chaplain, you helped establish the proper climate through your remarks.” Our opportunities for public utterance are not neutral in effect, and they represent both an enormous privilege and a profound responsibility.